

WASHINGTON POST

2 DECEMBER 1974

Mylai Prober Sees Injustice,

Cover-up

By Leroy Aarons

Washington Post Staff Writer

KENTFIELD, Calif.—William R. Peers grew up in the Depression, worked his way through college and absorbed a set of strong moral principles from a mother whom he adored, and who died while he was a young man.

Peers carried his principles through a military career that saw him serve as a member of the Reserve Officers Training Corps, an Office of Strategic Services intelligence agent in Burma and China during World War II, a founding member of the CIA and a commanding officer in Vietnam before his retirement in July, 1973, as a lieutenant general.

In late 1969 and early 1970, under orders from Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman William C. Westmoreland, Peers compiled a massive secret report on the slaughter at Mylai, based on the sworn testimony of 401 persons and covering 20,000 pages of transcripts and documents.

That report, part of which recently was declassified and part of which remains secret, found that "both wittingly and unwittingly," high-level officers sought to cover up the Mylai massacre of March, 1968, in which 175 to 400 Vietnamese noncombatants were slain by soldiers of the Americal Division.

Only one man, Lt. William L. Calley Jr., was ever convicted for Mylai or its aftermath. To Peers, now living quietly in a San Francisco suburb, the failure of the military to bring those responsible for Mylai to trial was an abortion of justice.

"We have two forms of justice," he said during a recent interview, "one for the enemy and one for our own people. I don't think we showed the same kind of sympathy toward the Germans, for example, or the Japanese, in the case of war crimes, but we turn around and we have an incident like this, which I consider a horrible thing, and we find we have only one man finally convicted and he's set free after doing a relatively small part of his sentence."

Peers looks and lives in the genteel manner of retired military officers. He lives with his wife in a comfortable two-story home decorated with Oriental art and furniture and other memorabilia of his 36-year career. He works part time as a consultant for the missiles division of Rockwell International, spends his leisure compiling his papers and playing golf. Six feet tall, white-haired and the same weight (175) he was when he played football, rugby and wrestled at UCLA, Peers, 60, is almost the central-casting image of an Army general.

Characteristically as well, Peers feels he owes no apology for American involvement in Vietnam and he strongly rejects suggestions that Mylai symbolized a moral degeneration, either in or out of the country.

But a visitor learns quickly that Gen. Peers has a rigid personal standard of justice.

In his report he named 30 individuals who by "omission or commission" allegedly shared culpability for the cover-up. Only 16 were charged, four went to trial and three were acquitted. The cases against 12 others were dismissed.

To Peers, who waited five years for his report to see the light of day, "there is a great deal of the same kind of coloration, in different degrees, that you might find in Watergate."

He added, "If people had been concerned, that [Watergate] wouldn't have happened either . . . I think we need a tightening up of our judicial system. I think we are seeing a tightening up . . . It is being forced by the American public, who are just getting jolly well fed up with this kind of stuff."

Peers was chief of Reserve Components at the Pentagon, having just completed a two-year tour in Vietnam, when he was summoned to Westmoreland's office on the evening of Nov. 24, 1969. By that time, the Mylai scandal had broken in the press and investigations were under way at several levels, including one by the military's Criminal Investigations Division (CID).

But, Peers related, Westmoreland wanted a probe that would focus not only on the atrocities, but on what the responsible officers and leaders did or failed to do about the incident once it was known.

Working against a 31-month deadline, the time by which the statute of limitations would expire, Peers assembled a small staff and began questioning. He soon discovered that the job was far bigger than he had envisioned. He added two civilian lawyers and extra military personnel; ultimately the staff totaled about 40.

They began to take sworn testimony, and made a two-week trip to Vietnam, visiting the site of the incident. Soon, the enormity of the horror—"murder, rape, sodomy"—became evident.

"Initially, I didn't believe that a thing like this had taken place," said Peers. "I think I was resisting it myself. But after a week, 10 days, two weeks . . . when the magnitude finally dawned on me, I was shocked and horrified. I wasn't prepared. This was one of the most difficult periods I've ever gone

With day after day of seemingly endless testimony of atrocities, even Gen. Peers' sensibilities became dulled. "As time goes on you sort of get numb to this whole thing," he confided. "You hear of all these atrocities from all these people . . . it's drudgery even to hear about it."

It was not until toward the end of the investigation that the extent and nature of the post-Mylai cover-up became clear. "We came to see that people hadn't done all they were supposed to have done. If they had shown any interest in this thing, any interest at all, and had sort of pushed the button, the whole thing would have been uncovered—right then and there. But nobody was that interested."

Peers said his commission found that reports of the Mylai massacre were filtering in within days of the incident from the Vietnamese district chiefs, from Vietcong propaganda and from an American helicopter warrant officer who had witnessed some of the carnage.

Orders to investigate were passed down from Americal commander Maj. Gen. Samuel Koster to brigade commander Oran K. Henderson.

Henderson's probe, Peers said, "was not a proper investigation . . . An investigation should include sworn statements, testimony from the people, and should go into very considerable depth . . . The fact was he had not looked into it to the depth he should have."

The same laxity, Peers said, carried up through the chain of command. Henderson's report, says the Peers study, was accepted "at face value and without an effective review" by Gen. Koster. In addition, it alleges possible conspiracy to further suppress information to "deceive the division commander."

Henderson was later tried on cover-up charges and acquitted. Was the failure to prosecute the others part of the cover-up? "I can't answer that question, frankly," said Peers. "Other people who were my contemporaries had to make the judgment of whether to prosecute. All I can say is, know-